

**Pragmatics**  
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## ***Indirect Speech Acts***

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### **1. Introduction**

Speech act theory originated from the works of the Oxford philosopher of ordinary Languages John Langshaw Austin (1911–1960). Austin first presented the main tenets of his theory in the lectures he gave at Oxford in the years 1952–1954 under the title “***Words and deeds***”, and subsequently in the William James Lectures he delivered at Harvard University in 1955. However, Austin pointed out that those ideas were formed as early as 1939. After Austin’s premature death the notes of his William James Lectures were edited, supplemented with earlier notes and tape-recorded lectures, and published in 1962 under the title “**How to do Things with Words**” (Austin 1962). In 1969 one of Austin’s pupils, the American philosopher John R. Searle, published his own version of the theory under the title “**Speech acts – An Essay in the Philosophy of Language**”, followed by several more works dedicated to speech acts. Searle’s systematization and development of Austin’s ideas

has been very influential, to the point that Searle's interpretation of the theory is at times taken as the definitive view of speech acts.

Two main ideas are at the core of speech act theory: the *first* holds that the meaning of an utterance is distinct from the function that the utterance performs (what we shall call the force of an utterance); the *second* is that all utterances amount to the execution of an act. Both these ideas well predate Austin's theory. However, his is the first account that incorporates both in a radically innovative philosophical explanation of linguistic communication. In a nutshell, speech act theory advances the fundamental claim that speech is a *form of action* rather than a *device for describing* the world. *The theory compels us to see communication not simply as the passing of information between a speaker and a hearer, but rather as the consequential and mutual acting of participants upon each other.* The relevance of the theory extends to the analysis of linguistic communication in its many forms, and more fundamentally to the understanding of human communication *tout court*. Discussion of the theory soon crossed the borders of language philosophy. As a consequence the literature on the subject is vast, and some references to speech acts are a staple in artificial intelligence, discourse analysis, second language acquisition, interpreting, education, and social psychology.

## 2. Indirectness:

Language is an important part of people's everyday life as it is the tool to communicate between each other. Language thereby is used to transmit ideas, feelings and thoughts. Language can create connections between people speaking the same language but also distance between people speaking a different language, wherefore language has a social factor.

In specific situations, people use language to express their feelings, to give information or to make other people do something and it is therefore important for

the speaker to be understood correctly by the hearer. With the statement that “*people use language to perform actions*”, John Austin presented language as a form of acting. By making an utterance, the speaker expects that his intention will be recognized by the hearer. The circumstances surrounding the utterances help the hearer to identify the speaker’s intention.

**Indirectness** is a widely used conversational strategy. People tend to use indirect speech acts mainly in connection with politeness (Leech, 1983: 108) since they thus diminish the unpleasant message contained in **requests** and **orders** for instance. Therefore similar utterances as in the following are often employed.

- *It’s very hot in here.*

In this example the speaker explains or even excuses the reason why he makes a request (**Open the window!**). It is argued that the speakers often prefer *indirect speech acts so that they do not infringe the hearer’s face*, which might be the case here too. It is also claimed that sometimes direct addresses may even appear impolite as in ‘*Would you lend me some money?*’ and ‘*Lend me some money!*’ The latter variant would be absolutely unacceptable in some contexts.

However, **politeness** is not the only motivation for **indirectness**. People also use indirect strategies when they want to make their speech more interesting, when they want to reach goals different from their partners’ or when they want to increase the force of the message communicated (Thomas, 1995: 143).

The motivation for indirectness seems to be more or less clear but the question most linguists deal with is: *How is it possible that the hearer understands what the speaker actually communicates by his utterance?*

To answer this cardinal question, the theory of **implicature** and the **cooperative principle** have been developed.

### 3. Searle on Indirect Speech Acts:

Searle points out that a *speaker's utterance meaning* and the *sentence meaning* frequently diverge (Searle 1975: 59). This is the case most obviously with **irony**, **metaphorical** uses, and **insinuation**. However, even in most ordinary circumstances we can often see no correspondence between the three major sentence types in English (*declarative*, *imperative* and *interrogative*) and the forces that prototypically correspond to them (*stating*, *ordering* and *requesting*). Consider “*I want you to do it*” (Searle 1975: 59) which is a request but has the declarative form of a statement. This is a very common occurrence. In English, for instance, imperatives are routinely used to *invite*, as in “*take a seat*” and “*come in*”.

Utterances that have the **illocutionary force** indicators for one kind of **illocutionary act** can then be used to perform another kind of illocutionary act. This is a serious problem for the theory, which is based on the conventional nature of the illocutionary force, and on the existence of predictable indicators of force. A way to treat utterances whose **force** differs from what their *force indicators* suggest is to assume that they have a *literal* force, which is associated by rule, and an *indirect* force, which is inferred by virtue of further information available to an interlocutor. Searle offers an explanation for the case of **directives** based on his own felicity conditions. Let us consider the utterance “**can you pass the salt?**” Given a Speaker S, a hearer H, and an action A (passing the salt) the felicity conditions for such illocutionary act are:

**Preparatory condition:** H is able to perform A

**Sincerity condition:** S wants H to do A

**Propositional content condition:** S predicates a future act A of H

**Essential condition:** Counts as an attempt by S to get H to do A

(Searle 1975: 71)

The request is *indirect* because the speaker *seeks to ascertain if the interlocutor is capable of performing the action* while in fact the *speaker is actually requesting the hearer to pass the salt*. The ability of the hearer to pass the salt is a **preparatory** condition for requesting *to pass the salt*. Still, this does not explain why it is the case that only certain requests are successfully made by asking if the interlocutor can perform the wanted action. As a preparatory condition for any request the speaker must hold the belief that the interlocutor can carry out the request, so why is it the case that sometimes the speaker asks? The answer may be found in the rituals of social interaction and the obligations of **politeness** (Brown and Levinson 1987), a dimension that is not integrated in the notion of illocutionary force.

#### **4. Analyzing Indirect Speech Acts:**

Three approaches proposed by Searle (1975) to analyse and understand indirect speech acts.

##### **The first approach (Dual illocutionary force):**

In this approach, indirect speech acts have two illocutionary forces *direct* and *indirect*.

For example, **Can you pass the salt?**

The felicity condition for a *question* and queries is the preparatory condition for a *request*. This explains why it can function as an indirect speech act, whereas in (*Salt is made of sodium chloride.*), for instance, cannot; the reason is that in this case, felicity conditions are irrelevant.

On Searle's view, because a **speaker's performing** and an **addressee's understanding**, an indirect speech act always involves some kind of *inference*, the question is *how this inference can be computed*. Searle's suggestion is that it can be computed along the general lines of the rational, cooperative model of communication articulated by Grice (1989). One interesting characteristic of indirect

speech acts is that they are frequently conventionalized. This can be illustrated by the fact that of various, apparently synonymous linguistic expressions, only one may conventionally be used to convey an indirect speech act, as illustrated in:

**Are you able to pass the salt?**

**Do you have the ability to pass the salt?**

Under Searle's analysis, both of the above sentences would be expected to be able to perform the indirect speech act of requesting, because (i) they are largely synonymous with (**Can you pass the salt?**) and (ii) they, too, inquire about the satisfaction of the addressee-based preparatory condition for making a request. But this expectation is not fulfilled.

Searle's response to this puzzle is that there is also a *certain degree of conventionality about indirect speech acts*, and that this may be accounted for in terms of conventions of meaning/usage. From a linguistic point of view, the conventionality here is correlated with the possible occurrence of "**please**". While **please** can be inserted before the verb **pass** in (**Can you pass the salt?**) it cannot in (**Are you able to pass the salt?**), as shown in:

1. I request you to **please** pass the salt.
2. **Please** pass the salt.
3. Can you **please** pass the salt?
4. \*Are you able to **please** pass the salt?
5. \*Do you have the ability to **please** pass the salt?

Furthermore, the conventionality indicated by **please** in (1) and (2) is one of the **meanings**, hence the speech act of requesting is performed directly. By contrast, the conventionality signaled by **please** in (3) is one of **usage**, and thus we have an indirect speech act.

**The second approach**, rather similar, approach is due to Gordon and Lakoff (1975).

In their analysis, there are inference rules called '**conversational postulates**' that

reduce the amount of inference needed to interpret an indirect speech act. Thus, in the case of (**Can you pass the salt?**), if the interpretation as a question cannot be intended by the speaker, then the utterance will be read as being equivalent to his or her having said (**I request you to pass the salt**) , thus resulting in the performance of the indirect speech act of requesting. Stated this way, the conversational postulates proposed by Gordon and Lakoff can be seen as another reflection of the conventionality of indirect speech acts. As to the similarities and differences between Searle's and Gordon and Lakoff's analyses, the major similarity is that both accounts assume that *the interpretation of indirect speech acts involves inference as well as conventionality*; the major difference concerns the question of balance, namely, how much of the work involved in computing an indirect speech act is **inferential** and how much is **conventional**.

**The third approach**, in contrast to the inferential models we have just discussed, is the "**idiom model**". In this model, sentences like (Can you pass the salt?) are semantically ambiguous, and the request interpretation constitutes a *speech act idiom* that involves no inference at all. On this view, (**can you pass the salt**) is simply recognized as a request, with no question being perceived. This is the position taken by Sadock (1974). There are, however, problems with this analysis, too. One is that it fails to capture the fact that (in contrast to what is the case for idioms) the meaning of an indirect speech act can frequently (at least in part) be derived from the meaning of its components (the technical term for this is '**compositionality**'). In addition, these would-be idioms' turn out to be quite comparable cross-linguistically (something which idioms are not). For example, an utterance like (**It's cold in here.**) may be used, with the same force as in English, in its Arabic, Chinese, German, or Modern Greek versions to indirectly request the addressee to switch on the central heating system (of course, always depending on the context).

A further problem is that in the idiom model, an interpretation that takes into account the *literal meaning* or the *direct illocutionary force* of an indirect speech act is not allowed. This, however, leaves examples like the following unexplained.

A: **Can you pass the salt?** B: **Yes, I can.** (Here it is.)

So why do people use indirect speech acts? An answer is that the use of indirect speech acts is in general associated with **politeness**. Thus, indirect speech acts are usually considered to be more **polite** than direct ones.

## 5. Direct and Indirect Speech Acts:

Apart from distinguishing speech acts according to their general function they can also be distinguished with regard to their structure. An utterance is seen as a direct speech act when there is a direct relationship between the structure and the communicative function of the utterance. The following examples show that the form corresponds with the function *Can you open the door? what is your name?*

-A **declarative** is used to make a **statement**: "You wear a seat belt."

-An **interrogative** is used to ask a **question**: "Do you wear a seat belt?" -An imperative is used to make a command: "Wear a seat belt!" (Yule (1996, 55)

Direct speech acts therefore **explicitly** illustrate the intended meaning the speaker has behind making that utterance.

The syntactic form of the sentence will sometimes be appropriate to make a direct speech act.

A sentence in the **Imperative** form will be intended and understood as an **order**.

Example: Shut the door!

**BUT**



This is not always the case, sometimes there is **no** direct relationship between the speech act verb and its main type.

Leech (1983) attacks Austin for "committing the grave error" of supposing that "there is a one-to-one correspondence between verbs and categories of SA in English". This can be also used here when looking for an adequate approach to distinguish between direct and indirect speech acts.

Searle stated that an *indirect speech act* is one that is "performed by means of another" (Searle quoted in Thomas, 1995, p.93). That means that there is an *indirect relationship* between the form and the function of the utterance. The following examples show that the form does not correspondence with the function:

- An **interrogative** is used to make a **request**: "Could you pass the salt?"
  - A **declarative** is used to make a **request**: "You're standing in front of the TV."
  - A **promise** is used to **threaten** someone : I promise that I will make you suffer.
  - A **representative** is used to make a **warning**: Mr.Harrison will be here tomorrow.
- (Yule 1996, 56)

The speaker does **not explicitly** state the intended meaning behind the utterance. It is the hearer's task to analyze the utterance in order to understand its meaning.

*How do we understand that we have to do something when we are merely asked a question?*

Searle (1977) answers this by the same logic of answering "*How do I know it was a car when all I perceived was a flash going past me in the highway*"

It is **not** the semantic approach (depending on the lexemes or in this case speech act verbs) will help us determine whether a speech act is a **threat** or a **promise**, **nor** the syntactic approach whether the form of the sentence in the declarative that will help us recognize an indirect speech act but rather a more appropriate approach would be the **Pragmatic** approach that will incorporate the language and its users in their everyday interaction, paying attention to both social and linguistic context.

## Further Explanation:

The Nigerian professor Ozidi Bariki describes a conversation in which he said to a friend:

**“I love your left hand.”** (The friend had a cup of tea in his hand). The friend, in reaction to my utterance, transferred the cup to his right hand. That prompted me to say: **“I love your right hand”**. My friend smiled, recognized my desire for tea and told his sister, **“My friend wants tea”**... My friend’s utterance addressed to his sister in reaction to mine was a *representative*, i.e. a simple statement: **“my friend wants a tea”**. The girl rightly interpreted the context of the representative to mean a *directive*. In other words, her brother (my friend) was ordering her to prepare some tea. (Bariki 2008)

This brief dialogue contains two examples of **indirect speech acts**. In both cases, the utterance has the form of a **simple statement**, but is actually intended to perform a different kind of act: **request** in the first case and **command** in the second. The second **statement**, *“My friend wants tea,”* was immediately and automatically interpreted correctly by the addressee. (In African culture, when an older brother makes such a statement to his younger sister, there is only one possible interpretation.) The first statement, however, failed to communicate. Only after the second attempt was the addressee able to work out the intended meaning, not automatically at all, but as if he was trying to solve a riddle.

Bariki uses this example to illustrate the *role that context* plays in enabling the hearer to identify the intended speech act. But it also shows us that context alone is not enough. In the context of the first utterance, there was a natural association between what was said (your left hand) and what was intended (a cup of tea); the addressee was holding a cup of tea in his left hand. In spite of this, the addressee was unable to figure out what the speaker meant. The contrast between this failed attempt at communication and the immediately understood statement *My friend wants tea*, suggests that there are certain principles and conventions which need to be followed in order to make the illocutionary force of an utterance clear to the hearer.

We might define an **indirect speech act** (following Searle 1975) as an utterance in which one illocutionary act (the primary act) is intentionally performed by means of the performance of another act (the literal act). In other words, it is an utterance whose form does not reflect the intended illocutionary force. My friend wants tea is

a simple declarative sentence, the form which is normally used for making statements. In the context above, however, it was correctly interpreted as a **command**. So the *literal act* was a **statement**, but the *primary act* was a **command**. Most if not all languages have grammatical and/or phonological means of distinguishing at least **three** basic types of sentences: *statements*, *questions*, and *commands*. The default expectation is that declarative sentences will express statements, interrogative sentences will express questions, and imperative sentences will express commands. When these expectations are met, we have a **direct speech act** because the grammatical form **matches** the intended illocutionary force. *Explicit performatives are also direct speech acts*.

An *indirect speech act* will normally be expressed as a declarative, interrogative, or imperative sentence; so the literal act will normally be a statement, question, or command. One of the best-known types of indirect speech act is the *Rhetorical Question*, which involves an interrogative sentence but is not intended to be a genuine request for information.

*Why is the statement I love your left hand not likely to work as an indirect request for tea?* Searle (1969; 1975) proposes that in order for an indirect speech act to be successful, the literal act should normally be related to the **Felicity Conditions** of the intended or primary act in certain specific ways. Searle restated Austin's Felicity Conditions under four headings: **preparatory** conditions (background circumstances and knowledge about the speaker, hearer, and/ or situation which must be true in order for the speech act to be felicitous); **sincerity** conditions (necessary psychological states of speaker and/or hearer); **propositional** content (the kind of situation or event described by the underlying proposition); **essential** condition (the essence of the speech act; what the act "counts as"). These four categories are illustrated as follows using the speech acts of **promising** and **requesting**.

Generally speaking, speakers perform an indirect speech act by stating or asking about one of the Felicity Conditions (apart from the essential condition). The examples in (1) show some sentences that could be used as indirect requests for tea. Sentences (1a–b) ask about the preparatory condition for a request, namely the hearer's ability to perform the action. Sentences (1c–d) state the sincerity condition

for a request, namely that the speaker wants the hearer to perform the action. Sentences (1e–f) ask about the propositional content of the request, namely the future act by the hearer.

- (1) a. Do you have any tea?
- b. Could you possibly give me some tea?
- c. I would like you to give me some tea.
- d. I would really appreciate a cup of tea.
- e. Will you give me some tea?
- f. Are you going to give me some tea?

All of these sentences could be understood as **requests for tea**, if spoken in the right context, but they are clearly not all equivalent: (1b) is a more polite way of asking than (1a); (1d) is a polite request, whereas (1c) sounds more demanding; (1e) is a polite request, whereas (1f) sounds impatient and even rude.

Not every possible strategy is actually available for a given speech act. For example, asking about the *sincerity* condition for a request is generally quite unnatural: *#Do I want you to give me some tea?* This is because speakers do not normally ask other people about their own mental or emotional states. So that specific strategy cannot be used to form an indirect request.

Following are examples for Felicity Conditions for **promises** and **requests** (Adapted from Searle 1969; 1975; S = speaker; H = hearer; A = action)

We almost automatically interpret examples like (1b) and (1e) as requests. This tendency is so strong that it may be hard to recognize them as indirect speech acts. The crucial point is that their grammatical form is that of a question, not a request. However, some very close paraphrases of these sentences, such as those in (2), would probably not be understood as requests in most contexts.

- (2) a. Do you currently have the ability to provide me with tea?
- b. Do you anticipate giving me a cup of tea in the near future?

We can see the difference quite clearly if we try to add the word **please** to each sentence. It can be noted that **please** is a marker of politeness which is restricted to

occurring only in **requests**; it does not occur naturally in other kinds of speech acts. It is possible, and in most cases fairly natural, to add **please** to any of the sentences in (1), even to those which do not sound very polite on their own. However, this is not possible for the sentences in (2). This difference provides good evidence for saying that the sentences in (2) are not naturally interpretable as indirect requests.

- (3) a. Could you possibly give me some tea, please?
- b. Will you give me some tea, please?
- c. I would like you to give me some tea, please.
- d. Are you going to give me some tea (?please)?
- e. Do you currently have the ability to provide me with tea (#please)?
- f. Do you anticipate giving me a cup of tea in the near future (#please)?

The contrast between the acceptability of (1b) and (1e) as requests vs. the unacceptability of their close paraphrases in (2) suggests that the form of the sentence, as well as its semantic content, helps to determine whether an indirect speech act will be successful or not. We will return to this issue below, but first we need to think about a more fundamental question: ***How does the hearer recognize an indirect speech act?*** In other words, ***how does he know that the primary (intended) illocutionary force of the utterance is not the same as the literal force suggested by the form of the sentence?***

Searle suggests that the key to solving this problem comes from *Grice's Cooperative Principle*. If someone asks the person sitting next to him at a dinner **Can you pass me the salt?**, we might expect the addressee to be puzzled. Only under the most unusual circumstances would this question be relevant to the current topic of conversation. Only under the most unusual circumstances would the answer to this question be *informative*, since few people who can sit up at a dinner table are physically unable to lift a salt shaker. In most contexts, the addressee could only believe the speaker to be obeying the *Co-operative Principle* if the question is not meant as a simple request for information, i.e., if the intended illocutionary force is something other than a question.

Having recognized this question as an indirect speech act, ***how does the addressee figure out what the intended illocutionary force is?*** Searle's solution is essentially

the Gricean method of calculating implicatures, enriched by an understanding of the **Felicity Conditions** for the intended speech act. Searle (1975) suggests that the addressee might reason as follows: “This question is not relevant to the current topic of conversation, and the speaker cannot be in doubt about my ability to pass the salt. I believe him to be cooperating in the conversation, so there must be another point to the question. I know that a preparatory condition for making a request is the belief that the addressee is able to perform the requested action. I know that people often use salt at dinner, sharing a common salt shaker which they pass back and forth as requested. Since he has mentioned a preparatory condition for requesting me to perform this action, I conclude that this request is what he means to communicate.”

So it is important that we understand *indirect speech acts* as a kind of *conversational implicature*. However, they are different in certain respects from the implicatures that Grice discussed. For example, Grice stated that implicatures are “non-detachable”, meaning that semantically equivalent sentences should trigger the same implicatures in the same context. However, as we noted above, this is not always true with indirect speech acts. In the current example, Searle points out that the question *Are you able to pass me the salt?*, although a close paraphrase of *Can you pass me the salt?*, is much less likely to be interpreted as a request (#Are you able to please pass me the salt?). How can we account for this?

Searle argues that, while the meaning of the indirect speech act is calculable or explainable in Gricean terms, the forms of indirect speech acts are partly conventionalized. Searle refers to these as “conventions of usage”, in contrast to normal idioms like kick the bucket (for ‘die’) which we might call conventions of meaning or sense.

Conventionalized speech acts are different from normal idioms in several important ways. **First**, the meanings of normal idioms are not calculable or predictable from their literal meanings. The phrase kick the bucket contains no words which have any component of meaning relating to death.

**Second**, when an indirect speech act is performed, both the literal and primary acts are understood to be part of what is meant. In Searle’s terms, the primary act is performed “by way of” performing the literal act. We can see this because, as

illustrated in (4), the hearer could appropriately reply to the primary act alone (A1), the literal act alone (A2), or to both acts together (A3). Moreover, in reporting indirect speech acts, it is possible (and in fact quite common) to use matrix verbs which refer to the literal act rather than the primary act, as illustrated in (5–6).

(4) Q: Can you (please) tell me the time?

A1: It's almost 5:30.

A2: No, I'm sorry, I can't; my watch has stopped.

A3: Yes, it's 5:30.

(5) a. Will you (please) pass me the salt?

b. He asked me whether I would pass him the salt.

(6) a. I want you to leave now (please).

b. He told me that he wanted me to leave.

In this way indirect speech acts are quite similar to other conversational implicatures, in that both the sentence meaning and the **pragmatic inference** are part of what is communicated. They are very different from normal idioms, which allow either the idiomatic meaning (the normal interpretation), or the literal meaning (under unusual circumstances), but never both together. The two senses of a normal idiom are antagonistic, as we can see by the fact that some people use them to form (admittedly bad) puns:

(7) Old milkmaids never die — they just kick the bucket.

Birner (2012/2013: 196) points out that under Searle's view, indirect speech acts are similar to generalized conversational implicatures. In both cases the implicature is part of the default interpretation of the utterance; it will arise unless it is blocked by specific features in the context, or is explicitly negated, etc. We have to work pretty hard to create a context in which the question **Can you pass the salt?** would not be interpreted as a request, but it can be done.

Searle states that **politeness** is one of the primary reasons for using an indirect speech act. Notice that all of the sentences in (1), except perhaps (1f), sound more polite than the simple imperative: **Give me some tea!** He suggests that this motivation may help to explain why certain forms tend to be conventionalized for particular purposes.

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